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ABSTRACT

Recent research into the religious lives of children has been influenced by various contemporary theories of child development including Fowler's (1981) "stages of faith" model. Profound religious states among children seem to have been neglected, yet the literature in this field attests to the existence of these states. The presence of these states may indicate a hidden developmental line in childhood which complements the developmental pathways of most of western developmental psychology. Biographical and autobiographical literature contains accounts of profound religious experiences such as those of Dante and Blake. Formal religious research surveys and child self-reports also report religious states in children. Two major lines of development are recognized. The first, called "up from the body" recognizes the existence of consciousness fused to physical existence. The second, called "down from the spirit" recognizes the journey from a higher level of nonmaterial existence to a more confining bodily existence. Religious states in children may not be shared by the child but instead may be pushed into the child's unconscious. Research methods using religious music, imagery experiences, and incense may help awaken religious memories. Further exploration into profound religious states in childhood promises to open up new areas of child psychology. (ABL)

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PROFOUND CHILDHOOD RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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Profound Childhood Religious Experience -- Thomas Armstrong

Abstract

Current research in childhood religious development has generally been guided by cognitive and psychoanalytic models. This paper attempts to look at religious experience in childhood from a perspective which is more like the research approach of William James, Richard Bucke, Herbert Otto and Evelyn Underhill, whose studies were limited to reports of adult development. The sources of childhood religious experience discussed in this paper derive from biographical and autobiographical studies of the childhoods of religious figures throughout history, formal religious studies of adults remembering deep religious experiences in childhood, and finally, children reporting on their own religious experiences through dreams, memories, and near-death experiences. It is suggested that the experiences reported in this paper derive from a developmental line which is distinctly separate from the cognitive, psycho-sexual or psycho-social lines used as a basis for much contemporary religious research in childhood. This alternative line of development (termed "down from the spirit" to distinguish it from "up from the body" development) is congruent with Jung's conceptions of Self, and eastern and western mystical notions of "soul". Implications of this theory for future religious research in childhood are discussed.

Profound Childhood Religious Experience*

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To a great extent, recent research in the religious life of childhood has been guided by contemporary models of child development. So, for example, the work of Goldman (1965, 1968) in the area of religious thinking, and the research of Elkind (1961, 1962, 1963) in the areas of religious denomination and conceptions of prayer (Elkind, Long, & Spilka, 1967) has been heavily influenced by Piaget's theories of cognitive development. Likewise, Fowler's (1981) model of "stages of faith" combines the developmental theories of Freud, Erikson, and Piaget. Each of these views tends to regard the child's experience of religion as undergoing a progressive stage-like transformation from early primitive, concrete conceptions of God, prayer, faith, religious symbols and/or concepts, to increasingly more sophisticated levels of awareness, until with the advent of adolescence, these perspectives begin to approximate the religious attitudes and beliefs of adulthood.

In an effort to create stage-specific models of childhood religious development, something essential seems to have been neglected: the presence among some children at certain times in their development of profound religious states which appear to have more in common with the adult mystical experiences described in James (1958), Otto (1923), Underhill (1955) and Bucke (1969) than with the childhood stages in the developmental models of Piaget, Erikson and Freud. These states of ecstasy, wonder, awe, numinousness, unity, light, and compassion have been popularized in our culture through the poetic writings

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of Wordsworth (1807/1975) and Traherne (1965) among many others. Contemporary western religious researchers have tended to minimize the significance of these childhood states. No explicit mention is made of these experiences in Elkind's (1971) comprehensive review of research into religious understanding in children and adolescents. Laski (1961) noted that her sample of child reports of ecstasy did not support the Wordsworthian view. Others, particularly in the psychodynamic school, have generally interpreted these experiences in terms of infantile grandiosity, immature dependencies, and primitive perceptions of parental imagos (Freud, 1961, Greenacre, 1956, Rizzuto, 1979). However, eastern perspectives have long acknowledged a deeper aspect to child development (see for example, Khan (1971), Trungpa (1971), Lhalungpa (1979)).

In this present study, I would like to suggest two things with regard to profound religious states in childhood:

1. A substantial body of literature exists suggesting the existence of these childhood states;
2. The presence of these states suggest a "hidden" developmental line in childhood which complements the developmental pathways charted out by Piaget, Erikson, Freud, Mahler and, in fact, most of western developmental psychology.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Other than scattered comments and occasional anecdotes, there is no comprehensive survey of the literature on profound childhood religious states to be found in contemporary psychological documents. The following outline suggests a beginning effort in putting together such a review. It organizes profound childhood religious states into three primary categories: biographical and autobiographical descriptions of childhood

memories in the lives of selected individuals, gleaned from personal documents; formal research studies of childhood religious experience gained from surveys, questionnaires, and interviews with adults recollecting profound childhood religious memories; and self-reports from children on profound states.

I. Biography and Autobiography

A wealth of material exists detailing the childhood memories of poets, writers, saints, artists, and other cultural and religious leaders. Consider, for example, this memory of Julian Green, recalling his fifth or sixth year of life:

> From these years gone by, I retain the memory of a moment of ecstasy such as I have never known since. Should we mention such things or conceal them? At this moment then, I raised my head towards the window, and looked out at the dark sky lit up by a few stars. How can I describe what is beyond the power of words. That moment was perhaps the most important in my life, and I do not know what to say about it. I was alone in a dark room, looking at the sky, and I felt what I can only call an elan of love. I have loved since, but never quite like that, without knowing that I was doing it. Somehow I knew He was there, looking at me and loving me too. How did this thought dawn in my mind? I do not know. I was sure Some One was there, speaking to me without words. With that I have said everything. Why must I write that I never found in any human discourse what I was allowed to feel then for about ten seconds, when I could hardly put three intelligible words together, and did not realize my own existence? Why am I obliged to set down that for years I forgot that moment, the torrent of days and nights almost obliterating it from my memory? Would I had remembered in hours of trial! Why has its recollection come back to me now? What does all that mean? (Ranwez, 1964, pp. 65-6)

Other individuals whose profound religious experiences or insights during childhood are recorded include: Dante at eight (Sayers, 1950); Blake at eight (Gilchrist, 1973), Black Elk at nine (Neihardt, 1961), Ramakrishna at five or six (Nikhilananda, 1970), the Buddha (Robinson, 1982), Meher Baba (Hopkinson & Hopkinson, 1981), Yogananda (1969), Boehme (1958), St. Catherine (Drane, 1880), Houston (1982), Franck (1979), Spangler (Hawken, 1976), Jones (1972) and Lilly (1973).

II. Formal Religious Research

While the previous category includes only exceptional cases of precocious individuals who later on in life achieved cultural recognition in their chosen fields, there have been a limited number of studies in the west which suggest that profound childhood religious experiences are accessible to a cross-section of the general population. Hardy (1979) reports research which began with the placing of an advertisement in several English newspapers asking "all readers who felt that their lives had in any way been affected by some power beyond themselves" to write an account of their experience. Fifteen percent of the respondents referred back to childhood for their experiences. These individuals were then sent a questionnaire to complete, and the results were tabulated and presented in Robinson (1977, 1978). Here is one example of a profound religious experience from those studies:

> I was standing uncertainly and clutching the table-leg for support [probably at about 15 months old]....I got a comprehension of the all-controlling being, and the nature of the Heaven...that I had come from before birth. It was attractive and comprehensible. I was feeling unhappy, and I was shown in a flash my whole life in front of me. I was given the choice: I could die now and go back to the Heaven that I knew, or I could go through with my life. I chose the life in the knowledge that there would be another life to replace this one if I had chosen to die. On making the choice, my comprehension of Heaven vanished, but I remembered that I had known what it was like; I also remembered that I had seen all my life, but that too vanished; but I do remember that, though my future was all planned out, the whole point was how I chose to react to it...The Heavenly state was more desirable, earth-life being something of a penance!
>
> (Recollection of a 47 year old female in Robinson, 1977, pp. 116-17)

Similarly profound experiences were reported by Paffard (1973) in an English survey of transcendental childhood memories in a population of adolescents and young adults, and by Hollander (1982) in an American survey of "unchurched" parents.

III. Child Self-Reports

Balancing the adult retrospective material of the above two categories, this category details memories and direct reports by children themselves of profound religious states of consciousness. Morse (1983) relates a near-death experience of a seven year old girl:

> The patient said that the first memory she had of her near-drowning was "being in the water." A woman named Elizabeth appeared, and the tunnel became bright. The woman was tall, with bright yellow hair. Together they walked to heaven. She stated that "heaven was fun. It was bright and there were lots of flowers." She said that there was a border around heaven that she could not see past. She said that she met many people, including dead grandparents, her dead maternal aunt, and Heather and Melissa, two adults waiting to be reborn. She then met the "heavenly Father and Jesus," who asked her if she wanted to return to earth. She replied, "no." Elizabeth then asked her if she wanted to see her mother. She said "yes" and woke up in the hospital.(p. 960)

Bush (1983) and Kübler-Ross (1983) contributed other accounts of childhood reports of near-death states which include experiences of other-worldly light, exquisite joy and peace, certainty of life beyond death, guardian spirits and related phenomena. Jung (1928/74) and Wickes (1963, 1966) report the presence of certain "big dreams" of childhood which suggest contact with a numinous, transpersonal, or deeply spiritual source. Finally, Stevenson (1966, 1977, 1983a) relates the experiences of children who claim to remember past lives. In one instance (Stevenson, 1983b) a Burmese child of 18 months was observed displaying precocious knowledge of Buddhist ritual and ethics despite having had little or no contact with such teachings.

A SEPARATE LINE OF DEVELOPMENT

I have suggested elsewhere (Armstrong, 1984, 1985) that profound religious experiences in childhood hint at the presence of a "hidden"

line of development which is very different from the stage-specific line of development charted out in its cognitive, affective, social and moral aspects by Piaget, Erikson, Freud, Mahler, Kohlberg and others. I have termed these two major lines of development, "down from the spirit" and "up from the body", respectively. In the "up from the body" strand of development, the child begins life as a zygote in the mother's womb (a purely biological entity presumably without consciousness). From there it grows into a blastocyst, an embryo, a fetus, and ultimately into a newly born baby. At some point, either before or shortly after birth, the child begins to develop the most rudimentary consciousness which is highly fused to physical existence. In the earliest stages, the child is said to be psychologically united with the mother. Gradually, the child starts to form stable images of self and other, begins to establish a rudimentary ego or self-structure and evolves through sequential stages of motoric, perceptual, affective, and cognitive growth (as mapped out by western developmental psychology). Development along this line sees a growing adaptation to cultural norms or societal (and religious) standards.

On the other hand, development "from the spirit down" has its roots not in the material act of conception but rather in Self (Jung, 1959), soul or spirit (Smith, 1976), another plane of consciousness (Khan, 1971; Steiner, 1971), between life or "bardo" states (Evans-Wentz, 1960), the higher self or higher unconscious (Assagioli, 1965), or past life-times (Stevenson, 1977). This is the line of development that Wordsworth wrote about when he described the child as "trailing clouds of glory" (1807/1975, p. 602). This "down from the spirit" (or "spirit down") strand of growth defines the journey from a higher/broader/deeper/more

comprehensive level of nonmaterial existence to a narrower/more confining/more separate/material or bodily existence. This journey has been described in various traditions as the fall from grace, the exile from Paradise, the incarnation of the soul into the body, or the imprisonment of the spirit. Children and adults who report memories of profound religious states of consciousness in childhood may be tapping into "spirit-down" development, while the developmental studies of Elkind, Fowler, Goldman and others may be dealing more explicitly with "up from the body" development, which it seems is exclusively focused on adaptation to the religious norms of the culture. (Cf. Elkind (1980a) "Insofar as anyone has been able to determine, there are no drives, sentiments, emotions or mental categories that are inherently religious. Psychic elements; it is agreed, become religious only insofar as they become associated with one or another aspect of institutional religion." p. 109). It is possible that the developmental dichotomy suggested here parallels the esoteric/exoteric distinction which has been drawn by some contemporary researchers (see for example, Slotten, 1977).

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

While a substantial literature has been shown to exist suggesting the existence of profound religious states in childhood, the tools used to explore more fully the nature of these experiences, their prevalence in the population, and the exact nature of their differences from conventional childhood religious experience, are still rather primitive, especially when compared with the sophisticated instruments which have already been developed and refined in contemporary childhood religious research. While Paffard (1973) has utilized a specific methodology for organizing experiences into interactions between ten basic categories

(joy, pleasure, enhancement, calm, trance etc.), most of the other research remains anecdotal, personal, and unstructured in nature. The accuracy of the adult recollections remains questionable, although their persistence in memory and their apparent psychological value to their recipients are factors in favor of their power, if not their authenticity. The child reports are almost all of the spontaneous variety. It is unclear whether an approach such as the Piagetian semi-clinical interview (Elkind, 1980b) would be successful in eliciting profound experiences in a random sampling of children. Because the experiences themselves are beyond words, it would be difficult constructing a series of verbal questions to tap these nonverbal levels. Some researchers such as Harms (1944) have sought to circumvent this problem by utilizing non-verbal approaches such as art. However even here, there may be reticence on the part of children to divulge the deepest aspects of their religious lives:

> One special trait...may be emphasized...This trait distinguishes the child's God experiences from his usual fairy-tale experiences. It is a kind of awe for the high and exalted which the child designates as the object of his religious experience. Owing to this awe, the child is occasionally unwilling to express his religious experience. (Harms, 1944, p. 115)

It may be, in fact, that the more profound the experience, the less willing the child is to share it with researchers, and thus, the less evidence there will be of such reports in childhood religious research. One might add to this that children (and adults as well) might not only be unwilling to share these experiences, but might themselves be unaware of deep states of religious experience that they have had in the past, owing to what Haronian (1974) called "the repression of the sublime." (Cf. Green's recollection, p. 3 of this paper). Because our society has few maps for making sense of deep religious

experience, when these experiences do occur in the lives of children, they tend not to be acknowledged by parents, teachers, and other adults (or worse, they are discouraged or frowned upon) and therefore are pushed back into the unconscious. Lilly (1973) observed this process occurring in his own childhood memory of telling an adult about a profound state that he had experienced:

> I...remember that I had made the mistake of confiding in a nun that I had had this vision. She was horrified and said that only saints had visions, putting me down thoroughly. At that point, I repressed the memory and that kind of experience... (p. 15)

It may be that as the culture begins to acknowledge the presence of such levels in childhood, spontaneous reports will begin to increase in the general population. Research methods may need to make use of variables such as set and setting in helping children and adults gain access to repressed or unacknowledged memories of profound childhood religious states. Music familiar from childhood having a spiritual or religious content, guided imagery experiences, experiences in nature, church services, incense, or other sensory-rich approaches may help awaken dormant childhood profound religious experiences. Even with these tools, the task of eliciting such memories may not be easy owing to what Schactel (1959) has referred to as the schematization of early childhood experience as one advances in age. Yet despite these difficulties, further exploration into profound religious states in childhood seems warranted and promises to open up entirely new avenues of research to the child psychologist interested in religious issues.

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